

GROWING DOWN

WHEN I WAS A KID I COULDN'T WAIT TO GROW UP. I IMAGINED MYSELF AS A DOCTOR, A ROCKET SCIENTIST, A MILLIONAIRE BUSINESSMAN, AN ORCHESTRA CONDUCTOR—JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING BUT A PASTOR! AS THE YEARS WENT BY, I LOVED THE LITTLE TOKENS OF GROWING UP THAT MY PARENTS CONFERRED ON ME.

WHEN I WAS IN THE FIRST GRADE MY MOM LET ME HAVE MY FIRST BOTTLE OF POP. IT WAS CALLED “GRAPETTE.” REMEMBER “GRAPETTE?” (I LOBBIED FOR COCA COLA, BUT MY MOTHER WAS CONVINCED THAT COCA COLA WAS EVIL.) WHEN I REACHED THE SIXTH GRADE I WAS ALLOWED TO HAVE MY FIRST CUP OF SANKA INSTANT COFFEE. IN THE 10TH GRADE I GOT A MOTORBIKE TO RIDE TO AND FROM SCHOOL. (THAT WAS HUGE!) IN THE 12TH GRADE I WAS ALLOWED TO USE THE FAMILY CAR TO GO ON DATES. I HAD JUST DISCOVERED GIRLS SO THE TIMING WAS PERFECT.

I THOUGHT OF ALL OF THESE AS SIGNPOSTS SAYING “ADULTHOOD—ONE MILE AHEAD.” RIGHT BEFORE I GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL, ONE OF MY TEACHERS TOOK ME ASIDE AND SUGGESTED THAT IF I REALLY WANTED TO ACT LIKE A GROWNUP, I SHOULD READ THE ADVICE THAT A CHARACTER IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* NAMED POLONIUS GAVE TO HIS SON BEFORE HE SENT HIM OFF TO COLLEGE. SO I READ IT. I DIDN'T TAKE IT, BUT I READ IT.

POLONIUS ADVISED HIS SON TO DEVELOP GOOD CHARACTER, TO BE TEMPERATE, TO BE LOYAL TO HIS FRIENDS, TO BE FIRM IN OPINION BUT NOT QUARRELSOME, TO BE A GOOD LISTENER, TO AVOID BEING JUDGMENTAL, TO NEITHER BORROW NOR LEND MONEY, AND TO BE TRUE TO HIMSELF. THAT'S NOT A BAD LIST OF THE QUALITIES WE LIKE TO SEE IN AN ADULT. THE JEWS HAVE A WORD FOR SUCH A PERSON—A MENSCH. A “MENSCH” IS A GOOD-HEARTED, RESPONSIBLE MAN WHO TAKES CARE OF HIMSELF AND HIS FAMILY. A GROWNUP.

BUT IN WHAT JESUS CALLS “THE KINGDOM OF GOD.” THINGS WORK DIFFERENTLY. AS A MATTER OF FACT, EVERYTHING IS REVERSED. IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD, WE DON'T GROW UP, WE GROW DOWN. INSTEAD OF BECOMING ADULTS, WE BECOME CHILDREN. INSTEAD OF LEARNING TO DEPEND ON OURSELVES WE LEARN TO DEPEND ON OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. INSTEAD OF TRUSTING THE WISDOM OF THIS WORLD WE START BELIEVING THE WORD OF GOD.

I THINK IT WAS BILLY GRAHAM WHO ONCE SAID THAT ALL THE PREACHING HE HAD EVER DONE COULD BE SUMMED UP IN A SUNDAY SCHOOL SONG: “*JESUS LOVES ME, THIS I KNOW; CAUSE THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO.*” IN SHORT, WE GROW INTO LITTLE CHILDREN. WE LEARN TO TRUST GOD MORE THAN WE TRUST OURSELVES. WE LEARN TO WALK BY FAITH AND NOT BY SIGHT—LIKE

ABRAHAM DID WHEN HE LET LOT HAVE THE BEST LAND AND TRUSTED GOD TO BLESS WHAT WAS LEFT FOR HIM.

WE LEARN TO GIVE GOD MORE AND MORE CONTROL OVER OUR LIVES. NOW HOW DO WE LEARN TO DO THAT? IT'S CALLED "SURRENDER" AND IT TAKES A LIFETIME TO LEARN, BECAUSE EVERY CELL OF OUR SINFUL NATURE SCREAMS OUT IN PROTEST AGAINST IT. WHY? BECAUSE ALL THE HOPES AND DREAMS AND PLANS OF OUR SINFUL NATURE CAN BE SUMMED IN ONE WORD: PRIDE.

PRIDE SAYS "I CAN DO IT AND I DON'T NEED ANY HELP FROM GOD." PRIDE WAS MANKIND'S ORIGINAL SIN—THE DESIRE TO BE LIKE GOD. AS THE SERPENT SAID TO EVE, "...ON THE DAY YOU EAT FROM IT YOUR EYES WILL BE OPENED, AND YOU WILL BE LIKE GOD...." PRIDE IS OUR WORST ENEMY. AND PRIDE CAN TAKE CONTROL OF OUR LIVES IF WE LET IT. AND IF WE DO LET IT, WE CAN'T SERVE GOD, BECAUSE AS JESUS TOLD US, "NO MAN CAN SERVE TWO MASTERS, FOR HE WILL EITHER LOVE THE ONE AND HATE THE OTHER, OR HE WILL SERVE THE ONE AND DESPISE THE OTHER."

ONLY GOD CAN SET US FREE FROM OUR PRIDE. WHEN WE OFFER OURSELVES UP TO GOD, HE BREAKS THE HOLD THAT PRIDE HAS ON US AND MAKES US HIS CHILDREN. WITH PRIDE, WE HAVE A SLAVEMASTER; WITH GOD WE HAVE A FATHER. AND ONCE WE ARE CHILDREN OF OUR HEAVENLY FATHER HE TEACHES US HOW TO THINK LIKE CHILDREN. HE TEACHES US TO LOVE HIM AND SEEK HIS GUIDANCE. TO WANT TO DO THINGS THAT WILL MAKE HIM PROUD OF US AND TO AVOID DOING THINGS THAT WOULD NOT MAKE HIM PROUD OF US. TO WANT TO BE LIKE OUR OLDER BROTHER, JESUS. AND THE BEAUTY OF IT IS—GOD WILL TEACH US THIS IF WE WILL LET HIM. HE SENT JESUS TO SHOW US THE WAY.

IN *PHILIPPIANS TWO*, PAUL DESCRIBES THE TRAIL JESUS MARKED OUT FOR US: "ALTHOUGH BEING IN NATURE GOD, HE DID NOT REGARD EQUALITY WITH GOD AS A THING TO BE CLUNG TO, BUT EMPTIED HIMSELF, TAKING THE FORM OF A SERVANT AND...BEING FOUND IN APPEARANCE AS A MAN, HE HUMBLING HIMSELF BY BECOMING OBEDIENT TO THE POINT OF DEATH—EVEN DEATH ON A CROSS." THIS WAS ULTIMATE SURRENDER—SURRENDER TO WORLDLY FORCES WHO COULD NOT UNDERSTAND HIM AND WHO HATED HIM.

HOW DIFFERENT JESUS' WAYS ARE FROM OUR WAYS. WE INSIST ON BEING RIGHT AND CAN'T STAND TO BE PROVEN WRONG. BUT WHEN JESUS WAS ACCUSED OF CRIMES HE DIDN'T COMMIT AND CRUCIFIED FOR SINS THAT WERE NOT HIS OWN, HE NEVER SPOKE A WORD IN HIS OWN DEFENSE.

WE LONG TO BE IN CONTROL, TO BE, "...THE MASTER OF OUR FATE AND THE CAPTAIN OF OUR SOUL." JESUS GAVE UP CONTROL TO HIS ENEMIES. WE PREFER TO BE SERVED. JESUS CAME TO SERVE. WE WANT TO WIN; JESUS CAME TO SURRENDER. WE MUDDLE ALONG. GENERATION AFTER GENERATION, MAKING THE WORLD AN EVER DARKER AND MORE DANGEROUS PLACE TO LIVE.

JESUS CAME TO BRING LIGHT AND LIFE INTO THE WORLD. ALL THIS FROM A SMALL TOWN CARPENTER WHO NEVER TRAVELED OVER FORTY MILES FROM WHERE HE WAS BORN, AND WHO SAID, *"HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY, BUT MY WORDS WILL NEVER PASS AWAY."* A CARPENTER WHO CHANGED THE WORLD.

SO HOW DO WE LEARN TO BE ONE OF GOD'S CHILDREN—LIKE JESUS? WELL, WE LEARN TO DO THREE THINGS. FIRST OF ALL, WE LEARN TO WORSHIP GOD LIKE CHILDREN DO. WE LEARN TO COME TO CHURCH ON SUNDAY LIKE CHILDREN GO TO SCHOOL EVERY DAY. WE LEARN TO THINK OF GOD AS A LOVING FATHER RATHER THAN A JUDGE. WE LEARN TO BELIEVE THAT HE CAN GET US THROUGH SUFFERING AND BLESS US ALL THE DAYS OF OUR LIVES. WE LEARN TO LOVE HIM AND TRY TO OBEY HIM LIKE A CHILD LOVES AND TRIES TO OBEY A LOVING FATHER. WE LEARN TO TRUST HIM TO DO EVERYTHING HE HAS PROMISED TO DO. THAT IS WHAT IT MEANS TO WORSHIP GOD LIKE A CHILD DOES.

SECOND, IT MEANS TO LISTEN TO HIS WORDS LIKE A CHILD LISTENS TO HIS TEACHER. TO BELIEVE THAT HIS WORDS ARE ABSOLUTELY TRUE AND WITHOUT ERROR. THAT HE HAS PERFORMED MIRACLES AND WILL CONTINUE TO PERFORM MIRACLES. THAT WHAT YOU ARE READING AND HEARING WILL HELP YOU BECOME MORE AND MORE LIKE YOUR SAVIOR. THAT'S WHAT IT MEANS TO LISTEN TO GOD'S WORD LIKE A CHILD DOES.

FINALLY, WE LEARN TO PRAY LIKE A LITTLE CHILD. I HAVE A SPECIAL INTEREST IN PRAYER BECAUSE I STRUGGLED WITH IT AND RESISTED PUTTING MY HEART INTO IT FOR A LONG TIME. FOR MANY YEARS AFTER I WAS SAVED, I THOUGHT OF PRAYER AS A JOB THAT I WAS SUPPOSED TO DO. AND SO WHAT LITTLE PRAYING I DID—AND IT WASN'T MUCH—WAS JUST A CHORE.

I EXPLORED EVERY RATIONALIZATION I COULD COME UP WITH TO LET MYSELF OFF THE HOOK. I TRIED TO CONVINCING MYSELF THAT SINCE GOD HAD PERFECT JUDGMENT AND PERFECT KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT WAS GOOD FOR EVERYONE, WHY IN THE WORLD SHOULD I TRY TO IMPOSE MY IMPERFECT JUDGMENT AND IMPERFECT KNOWLEDGE ON HIM? I WAS SO PROUD OF THAT LINE OF REASONING THAT I ALMOST PERSUADED MYSELF. BUT NOT QUITE.

I SAID, "WHY SHOULD I TRY TO TELL GOD WHAT TO DO? HE KNOWS WHAT TO DO." THAT ALLOWED ME TO FEEL HUMBLE WHICH MADE ME FEEL GOOD ABOUT MYSELF. I TOOK PRIDE IN MY HUMILITY. BUT I COULDN'T MAKE THAT FLY EITHER.

BUT AFTER ALL THE RATIONALIZING I WAS LEFT WITH THIS: I SHOULD PRAY BECAUSE GOD TOLD ME TO PRAY. AND ONCE I STARTED PUTTING SERIOUS, DAILY TIME INTO PRAYER—MIRACLES STARTED HAPPENING. AND THEY STILL DO.

I DIDN'T—AND STILL DON'T—KNOW EXACTLY HOW GOD USES MY PRAYERS TO CHANGE THINGS OUTSIDE OF ME. WHAT I DO KNOW IS THAT HE USES MY PRAYERS TO CHANGE ME. HE HAS CHANGED ME FROM A WORLD-WEARY

CYNIC INTO A TRUSTING CHILD. FROM A PERSON WHO THOUGHT PRAYING WAS A JOB TO ONE WHO REJOICES IN HIS DAILY HOUR OF PRAYER. FROM A SCOFFER AND MOCKER INTO A HAPPY PILGRIM.

NONE OF MY CHILDHOOD DREAMS OF WORLDLY GLORY CAME TRUE. I DIDN'T BECOME A DOCTOR OR A ROCKET SCIENTIST OR A MILLIONARE BUSINESSMAN OR AN ORCHESTRA CONDUCTOR. GOD TURNED ME INTO SOMETHING FAR BETTER THAN ANY OF THESE. HE TURNED ME INTO A CHILD.

AMEN.

Matthew 18:1-6 The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven

18 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

² He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. ³ And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

⁶ “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 Christ Crucified Is God’s Power and Wisdom

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.